

# Walter Murch



## Works in the Exhibition

*Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width.*

### PAINTINGS

*Self-Portrait (W.T.M.)*, 1940  
Oil on board, 14 x 12½  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,  
Philadelphia: Lambert Fund Purchase

*Monolith of Time*, 1941  
Oil on canvas, 15 x 19  
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; Gift of  
Henry Schnakenberg

*Still Life with Red Ribbon*, 1945  
Oil on canvas board, 14¾ x 19  
Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

*Metronome*, 1946  
Oil on canvas, 21¼ x 15¼  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Allen Grover

*Winter Palace*, c. 1946  
Oil on panel, 15 x 20  
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips  
Academy, Andover, Massachusetts;  
Bequest of Edward Wales Root, 1957

*The Circle*, 1948  
Oil on canvas, 26 x 21½  
The Brooklyn Museum, New York; Dick S.  
Ramsey Fund Purchase

*The Lock*, 1948  
Oil on canvas, 22 x 18  
Private collection

*The Calculator*, 1949  
Oil on canvas mounted on board, 20 x 20  
IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York

*Medley*, 1950–51  
Oil on canvas, 26⅝ x 20  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.35

*The Bulb*, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 21 x 17  
Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr.

*Geometric Forms in a Landscape*, 1951–52  
Oil on board, 18 x 22¼  
Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr.

*Governor II*, 1952  
Oil on paper over masonite, 40⅜ x 17¾  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York:  
Purchase, with funds from the Wilden-  
stein Benefit Purchase Fund 53.111

*Taking Off*, 1952  
Oil on board, 16¾ x 16  
Toledo Museum of Art: Muscum Purchase  
Fund

*Cooked Eel*, 1953  
Oil on cardboard, 12⅜ x 39⅞  
Estate of the artist

*Red Cabbage*, 1956  
Oil on cardboard, 18⅜ x 15¼  
Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr.

*Carburetor*, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 32½ x 27½  
The Chase Manhattan Bank, New York

*Cut Stone*, 1960  
Oil on canvas, 22 x 15  
Collection of Walter S. Murch

*Moon Rock*, 1961  
Oil on canvas, 21¾ x 32  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York:  
Gift of the Ford Foundation Purchase  
Program 62.12

*Clock Face*, 1962  
Oil on canvas mounted on board, 24 x 18  
National Museum of American Art, Smith-  
sonian Institution, Washington, D.C.:  
Gift of S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc.

*Enlarged Doll*, 1965  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 32  
Estate of the artist

### DRAWINGS

*Still Life with Blue Ribbon*, 1945  
Pastel on paper, 12 x 15  
Kennedy Galleries, New York

*Meehanism*, 1949  
Wash on paper, 10¼ x 12⅜  
Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

*Study with Melon, Onion and Rock*, 1961  
Mixed media on paper, 20 x 27  
Collection of Frank Lavaty

*Melon*, 1962  
Oil on wallpaper, 15⅛ x 12¾  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York:  
Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.36

*Tea Pot*, 1962  
Watercolor on paper, 28¾ x 22  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Gift of Charles Simon 78.105

*Brooklyn—Architectural Fragment*, 1964  
Watercolor on paper, 29 x 32  
The Chase Manhattan Bank, New York

*Doll*, 1964  
Mixed media on paper, 24½ x 18½  
Collection of Barbara Whipple

*Sphere and Cloth Study*, 1964  
Mixed media on wallpaper, 19¼ x 16½  
Collection of Frank Picarello, Jr.

*Wig Forms*, 1964  
Mixed media on paper, 40 x 26  
Collection of Andrew Crispo

*Grey Melon*, 1965  
Mixed media on paper, 19 x 15⅛  
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

*Pressure Gauge*, 1965  
Mixed media on paper, 27¾ x 21¼  
Collection of Walter S. Murch

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

September 12–November 18, 1986



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## "A Peculiar Beauty"



*The Bulb*, 1951

Walter Murch's self-declared intention was to achieve "a peculiar beauty" that would "strike a chord inside, deep inside one, a chord that is inexplicable." This statement may seem enigmatic, but Murch's works clearly reveal a unique approach to painting and drawing, a pervasive dichotomy between convention and invention. As a result, the soulful poetry of his art is felt rather than articulated by individual pieces.

Murch was born in Toronto in 1907 into an artistically inclined family, particularly in the area of music. His father owned a jewelry shop filled with diminutive and intricate items. His training in art at the Ontario College of Art was largely academic, though he was aware of the more adventurous work of the Canadian group of artists known as The Seven and of American Social Realist tendencies. After he moved to New York in 1927, he earned his living in commercial art. In various capacities—as an illustrator, designer, and muralist—Murch was called upon to render places and products with some degree of accuracy.

During this period, Murch also made repeated trips to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, to study the works of the Old Masters, among whom he developed an ongoing admiration for Rembrandt and Chardin. But he was attracted as well to the newer, more unorthodox tendencies emerging in New York in the thirties and forties. At the Grand Central School of Art, he enrolled in a course taught by Arshile Gorky and remained his student and friend for several years. It was Gorky who introduced Murch to modernist work and theory. Under Gorky's tutelage, he abandoned his tight, didactic style for a looser handling that was less directed toward the recording of nature. Like his mentor, Murch became interested in Surrealist painting. He frequented the Julien Levy and Brummer galleries, where he saw and was fascinated by the work of Pierre Roy. Ultimately, however, Murch found Surrealist work too arch and affected for his own purposes. During this time, he was also friendly with Joseph Cornell, whose obsession with certain types of objects and their inclusion within a hushed, exclusive environment paralleled Murch's own predilections. Murch was familiar as well with Abstract Expressionist art. Like Jackson Pollock, Bradley Walker Tomlin and Barnett Newman, Murch was associated with the Betty Parsons Gallery. In 1948, Parsons presented a show of his paintings followed by one of Pollock's work. Both artists became concerned with a modern theoretical basis for art, though Pollock veered toward abstraction while Murch preferred realism as a vehicle for expressing subconscious forces.

Thus, Murch's beginnings were marked by dual pulls from past and present art, tradition and innovation; his destiny was to plot an individual and original course between the two. In an idiosyncratic way, he managed to merge what today, in a world mesmerized by novelty, would appear as the diametrically opposed realms of historical and contemporaneous art. During the course of his career, he achieved this reconciliation through a peculiar choice of subjects and unconventional approach to technique.

Murch's work has been related to modernist movements in art, especially in terms of his selection and juxtaposition of unlike objects, while his realistic mode signaled indebtedness to art history. A case in point is *The Bulb* (1951), an arresting painting because of its subject, a light bulb that appears close up at the center of the canvas. Murch's interest in manufactured products has caused his work to be considered in relationship to Pop art. In this instance, his depiction of a light bulb predates Jasper Johns' appropriation of the same subject. Both artists chose to elevate to an artistic context a device so commonplace that it is usually taken for granted in daily life. To find it the focus of a painting provokes surprise, particularly in Murch's work, where it appears in a conventional still-life format.

Murch also disposed disparate objects in what can best be termed a Surrealist manner. Often, he adjoined mechanisms common to present-day culture with the fruits and vegetables of traditional still-life painting. No other artist combines yesterday and today, nature and machine, as consistently as Murch. In *Carburetor* (1957), a machine occupies front and center of the canvas; it is set up on blocks and constitutes a dominant, quite muscular image next to the precariously perched onion. A strange chord is struck by the conjunction of these unrelated objects, each severed from its ordinary context and presented for our inspection and speculation. Moreover, the stable, reposeful stance of the mechanisms is countered by the capricious pose of the onion, which disrupts the almost classical sense of serenity and dignity.

The queer sensation generated by dichotomous objects placed in situations slightly awry is attenuated in works where Murch introduces the dreamlike phenomenon of levitation, as in *Metronome* (1946). Created as it was during a period of the artist's greatest enthusiasm for historical painting, this work demonstrates his concern for realizing dramatically lit forms within a heavily painted surface. One does not realize at first that the metronome is elevated off its shelf and the resultant discovery incites

an astonishment that is tempered by Murch's matter-of-fact portrayal. There is present a Surrealist combination of possibility and impossibility. The metronome is painted here as a solid object, yet it appears without weight. Brilliant illumination in itself seems capable of lifting the device and lends a spiritual aura that charges the painting field.

A final example, *Wig Forms* (1964), reveals the unusual methods Murch employed to achieve a painterly, atmospheric effect. This "air," as Murch termed it, and its resultant romantic connotations, were realized through his acceptance and incorporation of accident and chance: he executed drawings done on old wallpaper, on paper left outside or submerged in bathtub water, or on sheets placed on the floor of his studio, where they accumulated dust and footprints. In a manner influenced by Jackson Pollock's painting, Murch liked to continue something already begun, to elaborate upon accidental marks.

Ultimately, the "peculiar beauty" of Murch's work derives from the inner response it sounds in spectators, which emanates from an association of seemingly incongruous elements controlled by the strong individuality of the artist. Murch cannot be discussed in relation to any school or other group of artists; he belongs, rather, to that mold of the solitary artist—like Albert Pinkham Ryder or Joseph Mallord William Turner—whose work stands out as a soliloquy among various choruses and refrains. Anachronistic as it might appear, it is precisely this quality of being outside of time that constitutes the strength and importance of Murch's work.

JUDY COLLISCHAN VAN WAGNER

*Director*

Hillwood Art Gallery

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